

Sidewalks in Garrett Park

The following comments are based on looking at some of the old Town brochures, early photographs, and the minutes of Town Council meetings. I sampled the material that had been scanned into Past Perfect in the Archives. More work is needed to create a definitive history of sidewalks in Garrett Park.

The question before the Historic Preservation Committee is whether the addition of sidewalks to some streets in Garrett Park adversely affects the characteristics for which Garrett Park was designated an historic district. There is no doubt that the survival of the 19th century plan for Garrett Park, which is based on the prevailing ideas of Romantic landscape design, is one of the primary reasons that Garrett Park was nominated for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. So one might ask "Were sidewalks part of the original conception for Garrett Park in the 1880's?"

The answer to this question can only be speculated on. Early Garrett Park had little need for sidewalks. There were six (perhaps seven) stable/barn/carriage houses in the Town in the 1890's. Mrs. Defandorf, an early chronicler, says that only 4 families kept horses. So there was little competition for the roads. In addition, the Town prided itself on the quality of its macadamized roads and stone gutters, advertising that the streets remained dry in all weather. The Town owned a quarry and rock crushing machine and most of its early energy and revenues went into maintaining roads. Care for the streets was the principal item in the Town budget in its earliest years. Good empty roads would have made walking on the streets easy and safe, so sidewalks would neither have been a necessity nor an amenity the Town needed to spend money on. But that does not mean that the designers of Garrett Park rejected the possibility of sidewalks. The first Garrett Park brochure of 1887 contains line drawings of the two "model homes" being erected and clearly shows people walking on a sidewalk in front of the houses. These are the only two illustrations in the brochure and were clearly designed to give prospective buyers a flavor of what the Town would eventually look like. The 1890 brochure for Garrett Park contains actual photographs of the houses that had been erected by that date and none have sidewalks. The text of the brochure, however, describes the available lots in Town as having "good streets and walks in front of the building sites..." (It should be noted that this brochure also speaks of the Town having good stores, plural, and there has never been more than one commercial building. So the brochure was speaking more of what developers hoped would be a reality, than to what actually existed.)

It is known that two boardwalks were built on the south side of Town along Keswick and Pembroke (now Kenilworth) Streets. These boardwalks were in poor condition, and obviously old, when the Town Council first discusses them in 1900. After several attempts to keep the walks in repair (including replacing the one on Pembroke with a 4-foot gravel extension of the street), the walks were finally removed in 1902. The walks were on the only two streets on the south side of Garrett Park that had houses in the 19th century. Pembroke also had the Chapel and school. The south side, or "Village" area also had a grid plan in contrast to the winding streets of the north or "Villa" section. Perhaps sidewalks were deemed appropriate for a more city-like street plan.

What conclusions can be drawn from this information? It does not appear that sidewalks were excluded from the plans for Garrett Park. They were mentioned or illustrated in brochures, and two boardwalks were built. But sidewalks were not a priority in a town with good, safe, dry streets, and so it does not seem that any permanent sidewalks were built by the Town.

There was another flurry of activity regarding sidewalks in the 1930's. Sidewalks were "informally discussed" during the October 2, 1931 Council meeting. In 1932, the owner of 10925 Kenilworth was authorized to build a sidewalk in front of his premises. Progress on this project was watched closely to assure that the work adhered to specifications submitted by Mr. Dye to the Council. There was obviously enough interest in putting in sidewalks that Mr. Dye had gone to the trouble to draft very detailed specifications for creating concrete sidewalks. Perhaps this is when the sidewalk along Waverly was built.

Sidewalks again come up for discussion in the early 1950s. There had been much building activity in Town by this time and the population was increasing, especially young families with children. In 1952 the PTA and the Garrett Park Estate Citizens' Assoc. request a black topped sidewalk from Flanders to Kenilworth along Strathmore so that children can get safely to the crossing at Kenilworth. The Town says it does not have enough money, but after some back and forth, they are willing to accept a privately built walk done to their specifications. The push to build those sidewalks that do exist in Garrett Park is often associated with safety for children. In 1933 the Town applied for a CWA project to build a playground on land at the corner of Montrose and Waverly. Among the justifications: "There are no sidewalks in Garrett Park, which condition results in our small children playing in the street where they are liable to serious accidents from automobile traffic."

In 1953 the Garrett Park Citizens' Association asks the Council to seek expert advice on putting blacktop sidewalks on both sides of Strathmore Avenue, which they consider to be hazardous to walkers, especially children going to school. The mayor approached the SHA about doing a traffic survey on Strathmore. The SHA representative replies that he and other experts "agreed unanimously that any municipality having a through street should have sidewalks for the safety of either children or adults, and that a survey to confirm it was unnecessary." The proposal bogged down in technicalities as to whether the Town could assess property owners on a state road and who controlled the parking there, so finally a single "temporary" blacktop sidewalk along the north side was built to avoid these issues.

In 1955 homeowners on Kenilworth asked for a sidewalk on the 10800 block "for the convenience of the many school children who pass there, and to prevent destruction of lawns." A blacktop walk from Strathmore to the school was quickly built. A plea was made for protecting the trees in the parking and the sidewalk was routed around them.

In 1961 there was a push to build a sidewalk—for the safety of school children—from Strathmore and Kenilworth to connect with an existing sidewalk on Waverly. There was also a proposal for a sidewalk from the Post Office along Rokeby as far as Argyle, but it was deemed the less important route of the two and it was never built. Despite repeated requests for the sidewalk on Kenilworth, it was not built until 1969.

I have not determined when the sidewalk on Clermont was built, but the first piece of it was proposed in 1961. Children running across a lawn had caused an irreconcilable feud between two neighboring families that actually led to fisticuffs in the street. It was proposed that a small stretch of sidewalk be laid so that the children could get up and down the street without entering the yard of the offended neighbor.

In 1963 the sidewalk from Kenilworth to Montrose along Oxford was approved and built, again for getting children to school. With the completion of the blacktop sidewalks, the Town had a network of walks from the Post Office to the chapel and school and along one side of Strathmore Avenue.

The last major sidewalk construction was that associated with the reconstruction of Strathmore Avenue which resulted in concrete sidewalks along both sides of the busy state road.

This summary is to show that the issue of sidewalks has recurred in the history of Garrett Park. Most of our sidewalks were built in the 50s and 60s when the Town had more than doubled in size, there was more automobile traffic and there were many more young children. Although the minutes are sketchy on this, the opposition to the sidewalks seemed to come from those who thought they were unnecessary and an expense the Town did not need to undertake. There was also concern for trees and plantings in the parking area which had been used as private land since the beginning of the Town. The principal justification for the sidewalks was the protection of children going to school.

But even if sidewalks are mentioned in the early brochures and have been built on a few streets over the years, it does not necessarily mean that they are a part of the historic character of Garrett Park. For lack of money and lack of need, sidewalks were not an element of the early development of the Town. The first roads were bordered by woods or by lawns that reached to the gutters. (In fact a great deal of Council time and expense was spent trying to figure out ways to keep the grass out of the stone gutters.) As the character of the Town developed over the decades, sidewalks were not a part of that development. There is one word about sidewalks in the early brochures, but there are many paragraphs expended on touting the natural beauty of the location and the care with which the town was laid out to take advantage of its site. One of the things that most sets Garrett Park apart from the mid-20th century suburbs around it, is the soft boundaries between yards and roads. Asphalt curbs may not be the most beautiful structures, but they undulate and get grassed over and become less visible with time. That is also true of blacktop sidewalks. The streets of neighboring developments are characterized by the crisp straight lines of light-colored concrete in roads, curbs and sidewalks. That is not Garrett Park. The Town has retained a sylvan, park-like quality which combines beautifully with its romantic town plan. This, along with its interesting and varied architecture, produces the characteristics that justified Garrett Park being recognized as an historic district.